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Rumsfeld Visited Baghdad in 1984 to Reassure Iraqis, Documents Show

Trip Followed Criticism Of Chemical Arms' Use

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Donald H. Rumsfeld went to Baghdad in March 1984 with instructions to deliver a private message about weapons of mass destruction: that the United States' public criticism of Iraq for using chemical weapons would not derail Washington's attempts to forge a better relationship, according to newly declassified documents.

Rumsfeld, then President Ronald Reagan's special Middle East envoy, was urged to tell Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz that the U.S. statement on chemical weapons, or CW, "was made strictly out of our strong opposition to the use of lethal and incapacitating CW, wherever it occurs," according to a cable to Rumsfeld from then-Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

The statement, the cable said, was not intended to imply a shift in policy, and the U.S. desire "to improve bilateral relations, at a pace of Iraq's choosing," remained "undiminished." "This message bears reinforcing during your discussions."

The documents, obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the nonprofit National Security Archive, provide new, behind-the-scenes details of U.S. efforts to court Iraq as an ally even as it used chemical weapons in its war with Iran.

An earlier trip by Rumsfeld to Baghdad, in December 1983, has been widely reported as having helped persuade Iraq to resume diplomatic ties with the United States. An explicit purpose of Rumsfeld's return trip in March 1984, the once-secret documents reveal for the first time, was to ease the strain created by a U.S. condemnation of chemical weapons.

The documents do not show what Rumsfeld said in his meetings with Aziz, only what he was instructed to say. It would be highly unusual for a presidential envoy to have ignored direct instructions from Shultz.

When details of Rumsfeld's December trip came to light last year, the defense secretary told CNN that he had "cautioned" Saddam Hussein about the use of chemical weapons, an account that was at odds with the declassified State Department notes of his 90-minute meeting, which did not mention such a caution. Later, a Pentagon spokesman said Rumsfeld raised the issue not with Hussein, but with Aziz.

Pentagon spokesman Larry Di Rita said yesterday that "the secretary said what he said, and I would go with that. He has a recollection of how that meeting went, and I can't imagine that some additional cable is going to change how he recalls the meeting."

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"I don't think it has to be inconsistent," Di Rita said. "You could make a strong condemnation of the use of chemical weapons, or any kind of lethal agents, and then say, with that in mind, 'Here's another set of issues' " to be discussed.

Last year, the Bush administration cited its belief that Iraq had and would use weapons of mass destruction -- including chemical, biological and nuclear devices -- as the principal reason for going to war.

But throughout 1980s, while Iraq was fighting a prolonged war with Iran, the United States saw Hussein's government as an important ally and bulwark against the militant Shiite extremism seen in the 1979 revolution in Iran. Washington worried that the Iranian example threatened to destabilize friendly monarchies in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan.

Publicly, the United States maintained neutrality during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, which began in 1980.

Privately, however, the administrations of Reagan and George H.W. Bush sold military goods to Iraq, including poisonous chemicals and deadly biological agents, worked to stop the flow of weapons to Iran, and undertook discreet diplomatic initiatives, such as the two Rumsfeld trips to Baghdad, to improve relations with Hussein.

Tom Blanton, executive director of the National Security Archives, a Washington-based research center, said the secret support for Hussein offers a lesson for U.S. foreign relations in the post-Sept. 11 world.

"The dark corners of diplomacy deserve some scrutiny, and people working in places like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and Uzbekistan deserve this kind of scrutiny, too, because the relations we're having with dictators today will produce Saddams tomorrow."

Shultz, in his instructions to Rumsfeld, underscored the confusion that the conflicting U.S. signals were creating for Iraq.

"Iraqi officials have professed to be at a loss to explain our actions as measured against our stated objectives," he wrote. "As with our CW statement, their temptation is to give up rational analysis and retreat to the line that U.S. policies are basically anti-Arab and hostage to the desires of Israel."

The declassified documents also show the hope of another senior diplomat, the British ambassador to Iraq, in working constructively with Hussein.

Shortly after Hussein became deputy to the president in 1969, then-British Ambassador H.G. Balfour Paul cabled back his impressions after a first meeting: "I should judge him, young as he is, to be a formidable, single-minded and hard-headed member of the Ba'athist hierarchy, but one with whom, if only one could see more of him, it would be possible to do business."

"A presentable young man" with "an engaging smile," Paul wrote. "Initially regarded as a [Baath] Party extremist, but responsibility may mellow him."

Staff writer Vernon Loeb contributed to this article.

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